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THE BATTLE OF THE GIANTS



Little John lifted Strong-i'-the-arm completely off his feet and threw him
down upon the flagstones.

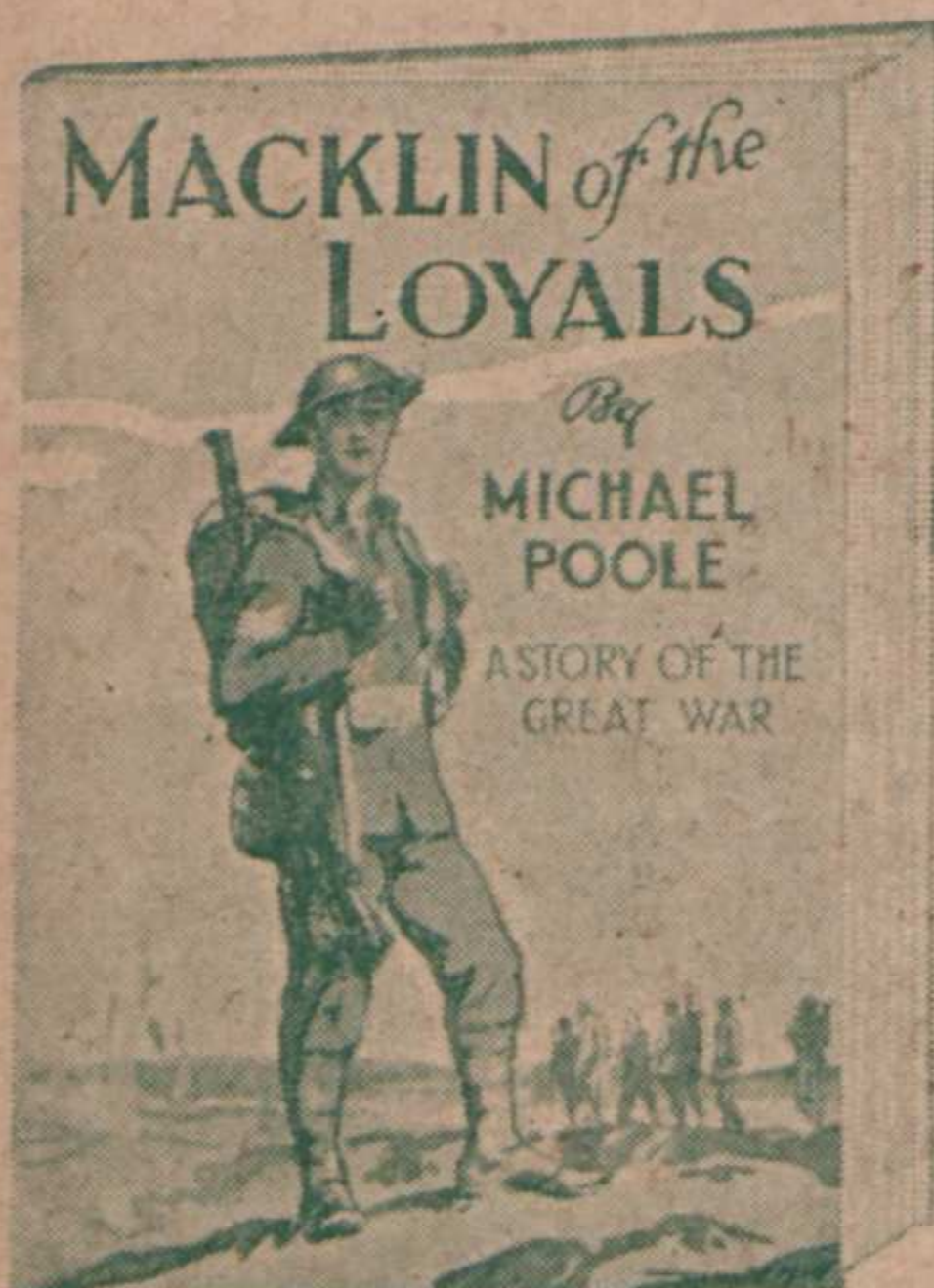
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THE BATTLE OF THE GIANTS

HOW A NORMAN BOASTER WAS BEATEN

:: BY THE SHERWOOD CHAMPION ::

This Book is from
the collection of

GRANVILLE T. WAINE,

3, Croft Lane,

HOLLINS, WHITEFIELD,

CHAPTER 1.

A Good Guest with Bad News.

LITTLE JOHN, the giant member of Robin Hood's gallant band of foresters, was in a sentimental mood as he mechanically polished the blade of his trusty battle-axe. He might have been thinking of some fair Saxon maid whom he had wooed in vain in the recent past, for occasionally he raised his voice in the lamenting melody of a touching love-song.

Friar Tuck, who was near by, suddenly thrust his quarter-staff into the earth and, sitting down, laughed aloud.

"How now, clown in a cassock?" Little John growled. "Are you laughing at me?"

"Laugh at a man who could break my neck with his finger and thumb! The saints forbid such a rash thought," responded the stout and jolly friar. "Nay, friend John. I laughed because Prince John and Oswald de Burgh, with twice a hundred men, are hunting through Sherwood for us, and here we are in Barnesdale Forest, in Yorkshire."

"I must e'en take that for an answer," Little John replied, shaking his head dubiously. "But hearken, Sir Shavenpate. I'll sing when it pleases me, dance when it pleases me, and——"

"You'll not forget to eat, whether it pleases you or not," Friar Tuck interrupted, with a fresh roar of laughter. "Tush! baby that you are, to lose your

temper for nothing. Truly you sing like a mavis on a spring morn; you talk like a court lady lipping her missal at church, and you dance as light as a dandelion seed."

Little John pulled up a tuft of grass and threw it good-humouredly at the friar's head.

Meanwhile Robin Hood stood, leaning his back against a tree, watching the scene around him.

It was an animated one. All about him were his followers, looking to their weapons, making arrows, polishing their belts, rubbing their horses down, fetching water from a spring, and engaged in a hundred-and-one other things their wild life necessitated.

Robin Hood had pitched his camp in an open glade in the immense and apparently impenetrable forest, for on every side the darkness of night abounded. So thickly did the trees grow that between some there was not room for man or animal to pass.

Little John was ravenously hungry, but as yet Robin Hood had given no word that dinner should be served.

"Master," he said, "it would do you much good if you would dine betimes."

"That," replied Robin Hood, smiling, "sounds like one for me and two for yourself."

"I know of no man who can eat two dinners at the same time," grumbled the giant.

"But I know of one who can eat twice as much as any other man," Robin Hood replied. "Dinner

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shall be spread at once. But what ails you, Little John? Why this grumpy mood?"

"This long journey, with never an adventure, has turned me sour," the giant replied. "There were plenty of places we might have made good hauls at, but you would not. By Mars! I'm as rusty as a discarded kettle that has lain four seasons in a ditch."

"Patience—patience," Robin Hood rejoined. "Lack of adventure has made me moody, too, and I care not to dine without a stranger for a guest—a baron, knight, or squire."

"One who can pay for his entertainment," observed Little John, with a grin.

"Ay, if his purse be too full," Robin Hood replied. "But if he be poor, he shall eat and drink his fill, and go his way without let or hindrance."

"If that be your only complaint," said Little John, "I swear to bring you a guest, be he rich or poor, before bite or sup passes my lips. Ho, there, Will Scarlet and Much the Miller's son, our chief needs company. Follow me."

"I'll make a quartet of it," said Friar Tuck, scrambling to his feet and pulling his quarter-staff from the earth. "Where is the darling of my heart? Where is Balaam, the ever gentle—the only ass that can fight like a man?"

The donkey approached him sideways and playfully lashed out one of its heels, a little too close to be pleasant.

"See that?" said the friar. "Balaam loves me like a Christian, and would fain enfold me in his hind legs. I'll lead the way."

"You will when your name is changed to Robin Hood," retorted Little John, striding to the front.

After leaving the glade, over which the sun shone brightly at intervals, they disappeared in the gloom.

For about half a mile the path was so narrow that they trod in each other's footsteps, Friar Tuck and Balaam bringing up the rear.

Then the path widened, daylight began to gleam through the tree-tops, and soon there appeared a stretch of open country with an abbey pleasantly situated on a slight eminence, with a

splendid trout stream near at hand, winding its way musically through the meadow lands.

It was Thursday, and three monks were hard at work fishing for the Friday's dinner.

Friar Tuck's eyes began to twinkle. "My brothers cast their lines well," he said. "See how the trout flash from the stream like bars of silver! Those baskets must be very heavy."

He smacked his lips and sighed as he spoke, thinking how nice some of those trout would be grilled over the embers of a fire in the forest that very evening.

Just then a bell at the abbey rang. The monks threw down their rods and, crossing their hands upon their breasts, walked demurely into the building.

"Little John," said Friar Tuck, "I fear that bad thoughts are in my mind. I ask you, would it be wrong to take one of those baskets of fish, considering that there must be hundreds more in the stream to be had for the angling?"

"Fish and birds belong to him who can catch them," the giant replied.

"I am glad to hear you teach me that," the friar said, rolling up his eyes. "Will you—shall I borrow some of those trout?"

"If you have any scruples on that score, I'll go myself," said Will Scarlet. "Doubtless the monks would not object to give us some if they knew how we stood in need of them."

"I hope that it is not wrong to take fish that belong to everybody," Friar Tuck groaned. "We'll place a coin for charity where the basket stood, or perchance judgment will fall upon us. A bone may stick in Little John's throat and kill him."

"My faith, you need not trouble your head about me," said Little John. "Look to yourself! You have faults enough to answer for, I trow."

"Too many, alas!" Friar Tuck replied, groaning again. "We are but human, after all, and the sight of—Ha, Will is near the basket! He has it in his hand! Good Will! Brave Will! Glorious Will! I could not have done it better myself."

As Will Scarlet was coming back to

where his comrades were hidden among the bushes, a man clad in the light armour of a knight appeared, riding in a very forlorn and careless manner. The expression of his face was full of care, one foot was in the stirrup and the other out, and as he drew nearer the foresters saw that his attire was well worn, and some parts of his armour rusty.

"Here's a guest for Robin Hood," said Little John, under his breath. "He seems to be making his way to the abbey, but I'll hail him ere he reaches the gate. Ho! there, Sir Knight, why so sad?"

At the sight of the giant's towering form, and those who leaped up beside him, the knight brought his horse to a standstill.

"If you are robbers," he said, "you are wasting time in detaining me."

"Robbers! robbers!" bellowed Friar Tuck. "Look at me! Look at my cassock, my beads, my shaven head! Do I seem in your eyes like a robber?"

"So many disguises are assumed in these days that it is hard to tell an honest man from a thief," the knight replied. "Your pardon, holy father, if such indeed you be."

"He is like the rest of us, loyal and true followers of Robin Hood," Little John said. "Sir Knight, fear no harm from us. If you were rich we would ask you to give alms lest your purse burst, but if you are poor we will help you. Your name?"

"Sir Henry Angerstein."

"Come, then, Sir Henry, and dine with Robin Hood."

"What!—with that rebel? No, no, no!" exclaimed the knight.

"I see," sneered Friar Tuck, "you have lent your ears readily to the falsehoods concerning the man feared by tyrants and loved by the poor. See for yourself and judge for yourself before you utter one word against Robin Hood."

"I have promised our chief a guest," said Little John grimly; "and, willy-nilly, Sir Knight, you must come with us. Friar, attend the knight, but ride apart, or that beast of an ass might bite his legs."

"Balaam is an angel until I bid him hide his wings," Friar Tuck replied.

"Well, then," Sir Henry Angerstein replied, smiling in spite of his fears and doubts, "I will go with you."

Robin Hood received the guest courteously, asking no questions as to his condition, but, seating him on his right side, gave the welcome command for the dinner to begin.

It consisted of venison, black game, pies made with various small birds, and a plentiful supply of bread and light ale.

"I vow," said Sir Henry as he placed his hands behind his head and threw himself back on the grass, "that I have not eaten so good a dinner for many a day. Perchance, Robin Hood, when you come into this country again I may be able to repay your hospitality. For the present I have so little money that I am ashamed to offer it to you."

"Spoken like an honest man," said Robin Hood, giving the knight his hand. "Now, tell me, and I will keep your secret—what has brought you to poverty? Waste and riotous living?"

"You wrong me," Sir Henry Angerstein replied. "For more than a hundred years my ancestors have borne the honours of knighthood. Only a year ago my income was more than a thousand nobles, but now I have scarcely sufficient to support the few retainers who live with me in my castle."

"But the cause—the cause?" said Robin Hood impatiently. "Golden nobles are not like dead leaves that fly away at a puff of wind."

"I owe my misfortunes to Prince John," Sir Henry said. "When his brother Richard, the king, set forth to the Holy Land, John sent for me, saying that he ruled England. I denied him the homage he demanded, and the cruel prince seized the lands from which I drew my income."

"The black-hearted usurper!" Robin Hood muttered. "It is impossible for such a wretch to do a kindly action. Well, Sir Henry, I believe your story, and pity you from my heart. But what brought you near the abbey, looking so forlorn?"

"To borrow of the abbot. He is a good man, and the only friend I know of," the knight replied. "I came to borrow a hundred nobles, but my heart misgave me, for it is a large sum, and I am already indebted to the abbot."

"You shall have no need to trouble the good abbot," Robin Hood said. "Ho, there, sweet Marian, bring my coffer hither!"

Maid Marian smiled as she rose to do the outlaw's bidding, for, like him, she delighted in acts of charity.

"Now count out a hundred nobles and pour them into the knight's wallet," said Robin.

"By the splendour of Paradise, I must be dreaming!" Sir Henry cried. "Heaven alone could send me such good luck. But stay. This must be a jest. A hundred nobles, and without security!"

"I'll take your word," Robin Hood replied. "As to repayment, bring me the money when you come, and for interest I'll crave a favour which you will not find hard to perform."

"Name it," said the astonished knight. "If it is anything that man can do, it shall be done."

"I shall hide in this forest for a time," Robin Hood rejoined. "Bring me such news as may come to your ears, for your enemy, Prince John, is mine, too, and he will hunt all England through for me."

"I will surely do as you ask," said Sir Henry as he grasped the outlaw's hand.

It was late in the day when the grateful knight departed, and Robin Hood, striking his camp, dived deeper into the forest and selected a spot beneath a range of hills, through which a torrent of water thundered.

The outlaw had not mistaken Prince John when he said the usurper would hunt him through all England.

Finding that Robin had slipped out of Sherwood Forest and through his fingers, the prince, furious at being so thwarted, set out in pursuit with Oswald de Burgh and two hundred men.

Among them was a man of gigantic stature, called Strong-i'-the-arm. He was a West Countryman, and had

travelled from town to town, earning his living by performing such feats as the gaping people had never gazed upon, until chance took him to Nottingham and Oswald de Burgh at once engaged him as his special henchman.

It so happened that, at the very time Robin Hood and his merry men were arranging their quarters in Barnesdale Forest, Prince John was not more than twenty miles away.

When evening fell the outlaw scouts were thrown out, and it was not long before Robin was astonished to hear that Sir Henry Angerstein, mounted on a fresh horse, had been sighted. He was evidently returning to report some news. The outlaw chief ran to meet the knight.

"You have news for me?" Robin Hood said.

"The worst," Sir Henry replied. "The accursed tyrant, John, and Oswald de Burgh have arrived. Even now they rest within the abbey walls, and their men, all in glittering armour, lie around. Robin Hood, I have come to conduct you to my castle. I know a secret way, and——"

"Stay! Stay!" Robin Hood interrupted. "You take too much alarm on my account. I have held my own before to-day, and I will never turn my back on a foe. My followers are brave, and, trust me, they fear not death, but to be taken captive they have the greatest horror."

"I know you and your followers to be brave," replied the knight, "but listen to reason. Far better will it be for you to fall back on my castle, which is scarce three leagues distant. I can offer you but poor entertainment, it is true, but——"

"Think not of that," the outlaw interrupted. "I have brought sufficient stores to last for more than a week, but before I say yea or nay to your proposal I must consult my officers."

The word was passed, and the leaders assembled at once.

Robin Hood had brought but fifty men with him, although reinforcements were on the way, and at length it was decided to accept the knight's offer.

"Sir Henry Angerstein," Robin Hood

said, "we shall be ready to depart in an hour, and so place ourselves in your hands."

"And, indeed, it is time," Sir Henry replied, "for the pursuers will soon be here. Hark! even now you can hear their horns sounding. Haste, I pray you!"

CHAPTER 2.

A Tussle in the Courtyard.—Robin Hood's Clever Ruse.

SIR HENRY ANGERSTEIN dwelt in Leabourne Castle. The great, grim building was almost all that the rapacious Prince John had left him. His lands had been sold and his coffers emptied.

Leabourne Castle was in a bad state of repair. A portion of the keep had crumbled away, and the machinery of the drawbridge was out of order.

The knight's few attendants were astounded and alarmed to see him return with so many men clad in Lincoln green, but a few words seemed to dispel their fears.

That evening the great banqueting hall was ablaze with light, and resounded with song and laughter. It was like old times to Sir Henry, and he was as merry as the most light-hearted there.

Early in the morning he and Robin Hood went over the castle and outer walls with the view of setting the men to work to repair the weakest places, and the foresters had scarcely thrown off their doublets and answered cheerily to their chief's call when a henchman watching from the highest tower announced that several men in armour were approaching.

The party consisted of six men; one, wearing the livery of a herald, was a giant, bearded with a long, tawny beard, like the mane of a lion.

This was Strong-i'-the-arm, and he and his companions had come to demand the surrender of Leabourne Castle and its garrison.

"Twill be well to let only the herald in," said Robin Hood. "Let the others remain without while we treat with him."

At that moment the giant sounded his trumpet with a loud flourish, and Sir

Henry, crossing the drawbridge, ordered the gates to be thrown open.

"Whence come you, and whom do you serve?" Sir Henry demanded.

"See you not the quartering of the royal arms on my coat?" the giant replied.

"What, and has Richard, my king, returned from the Holy Land?"

"By the forge of Vulcan, no!" Strong-i'-the-arm replied; "and if the news that is come to England be true, he lies sick unto death outside the walls of Acre. So we shall be throwing up our caps soon and shouting 'Long live King John!'"

"John can never be king while Richard lives," Sir Henry replied. "So, sir, you come from the prince who is never tired of fitting his brother's crown upon his head. Come you in alone and deliver your message. I promise you, on my knightly honour, that no harm shall be done you."

"I am content," Strong-i'-the-arm replied sneeringly. "Sir Henry Angerstein, it is no secret whom you are harbouring at your castle, but I care not for twenty Robin Hoods, nor all the rebels that he can call to his aid."

"Use softer words," Sir Henry replied, placing his hand on his sword. "You come to me under a truce; I will reply to the message, whatever it may be, and then bid you depart."

The giant dismounted and, giving his horse in the charge of one of his attendants, followed Sir Henry across the drawbridge, through the open portcullis, and into the courtyard. There, for the first time in his life, Strong-i'-the-arm saw Robin Hood, Will Scarlet, and Little John.

"Ho, ho!" he cried. "So it is true what they told me of the rebel giant?"

"Rebel in your teeth, base hireling of a baser prince!" Little John retorted. "'Fore Heaven, if I were free to cope with you, I'd show you the difference between a free-born Saxon and a Norman slave!"

"Hush, hush!" Sir Henry Angerstein said. "Let us hear what he has to say."

"He provoked me. A dumb man might have found his tongue to answer him," Little John growled.

"True, friend John," said Robin Hood. "Be patient! There is yet time to try conclusions with this swaggerer!"

"Now for your message, herald," Sir Henry said. "Speak out, and let me have it as put into your mouth. I require no mincing of words."

"You shall have none from me," Strong-i'-the-arm retorted. "My royal master sends you no flowery greeting. He denounces you as a traitor, inasmuch as you are protecting rebels in defiance of the laws. Moreover, he requires that you will come to him in person, delivering the keys of your castle, and begging mercy on your knees. As for the rebels, there being no escape for them, they will do well to say their prayers and prepare for death."

"Amen to that," said Friar Tuck, with comic solemnity, as he walked to Robin Hood's side.

"Surely," cried Sir Henry indignantly, "no such message was ever delivered to man who has won his golden spurs on field of battle! I vow, by the lands that were my father's and mine until Prince John robbed me of them, that I am no traitor, nor are these men rebels——"

"I will speak for myself presently," Robin Hood interposed.

"Amen to that!" quoth Friar Tuck.

Little John burst into a roar of laughter, so loud and ironical that Strong-i'-the-arm quivered with rage.

"Hear me, then," Sir Henry continued. "Get back to this cruel and avaricious prince, and tell him that I refuse to surrender, either in person or by deputy. I will not give up the keys of my castle, nor will I betray by word or deed these noble foresters, who fight only for their liberty and against tyrants."

"And for myself, take back answer that will suit both Prince John and Oswald de Burgh," said Robin Hood. "They, not I, had best look to themselves, say their prayers, and prepare for death."

"Amen to that," quoth Friar Tuck, for the third time.

"Within six hours you will eat your words," Strong-i'-the-arm said. "If your men are not fools, they will sur-

render; for although Prince John has said that they must die, I trow that, in some instances, he will find it in his heart to err on the side of mercy."

This speech so incensed Little John that he could no longer control himself.

"Loud-tongued blusterer clad in borrowed livery!" he bellowed. "I have a mind to pluck your beard first, and sling you into the moat like a mangy cur. Away! These hands of mine are hot, like iron fresh from a furnace, and if they strike I promise you they shall strike hard!"

"You dare!" cried Strong-i'-the-arm. "Dog of a rebel, you shall be twice hanged for this, and e'en then, while yet alive, your wagging tongue shall be held up to your eyes!"

A vengeful roar, like the pent-up bursting of a storm, came from Little John's throat and seemed to rack his huge form. Before a hand could restrain him he had dashed forward and closed with Strong-i'-the-arm.

"Hold!" cried Sir Henry Angerstein. "I cannot permit this here."

But the rival giants were deaf to his words.

Throwing their arms round each other, they stood as though locked with bands of iron. A moment thus, and then they began to twist and writhe.

"When Saxon churl beats me, let me die!" Strong-i'-the-arm hissed.

"When Norman hireling masters me by fair means, let my body be flung to the beagles," Little John replied.

"Now for a throw!"

As he spoke he seemed to grow several inches taller, and lifting Strong-i'-the-arm completely off his feet, bore him down with such a crash that the flagstones of the courtyard seemed to rebound.

"Amen to that!" said Friar Tuck.

"Peace!" Robin Hood exclaimed. "The herald is dead and our message must be delivered to those who attended him."

"He is only stunned," Little John said, rising and stretching his aching arms above his head. "A little water will bring him round. Phew! He is the toughest morsel I have yet handled, and I tell you, Robin Hood, that it was

but the turn of a straw which way the tussle would end."

Some water was dashed over Strong-i'-the-arm's face, and presently he opened his eyes.

"So," he said, "I was thrown. Well, it is a debt that I can repay. We shall meet again, Little John."

"Amen to that," said Friar Tuck.

In a few minutes Strong-i'-the-arm had so far recovered as to take his departure and tell his sorry tale to the men who were waiting for him.

The drawbridge of Leabourne Castle was raised immediately the Norman giant had crossed it, and everything was made fast.

A sense of uneasiness reigned among the small garrison, although no man betrayed it by word or sign.

There was not one there but was willing to lay down his life for Robin Hood, and yet all felt that, if the castle was besieged in real earnest, it could not be successfully defended.

Great heaps of rushes were brought into the banqueting-hall, and that night the men slept and watched in turns with their bows and swords ready to their hands.

The morning broke still and quiet. There were no signs as yet of the enemy, but Robin Hood knew that it was the hush that heralds the bursting of a storm.

"Others of my men are on their way from Sherwood," he said, "and I fear that, unless they can be warned, they will be caught and put to death."

"Let me go forth," Sir Henry said. "I will risk my life for you, good Robin."

"Tush! No; I am thinking of a plan to draw the enemy from the forest."

"What!" cried Sir Henry. "Would you have them come before we have time to complete repairing the breaches in the outer walls?"

"Ay, that would I," Robin replied. "Listen! We will call our men into the castle, withdraw the sentinels, and throw the outer gates open for all who care to enter."

"Are you mad?" Sir Henry exclaimed.

"You will not call me so when I have

told you that this is in my mind," Robin replied. "Come where we can talk privately."

Half an hour later the gates were thrown open, the drawbridge was lowered, and not a sound came from the castle. It wore a deserted look, for even the portcullis was open, its great steel teeth hanging ominously above the noble archway.

Presently the sun began to glint on armour and weapons. Confident in their strength, the Normans approached, singing their war-songs and shouting their battle-cries.

The advance guard galloped up, and on seeing the gates open wheeled their horses and fell back on the main body, shouting that Sir Henry Angerstein and the rebels had fled.

Prince John and Oswald de Burgh stared at each other in dismay.

"Gone!" said the prince. "Surely that cannot be, unless they have disappeared into the earth. Was not a cordon drawn a mile round the castle, and was it not reported to me that no man had passed during the night? Sheriff of Nottingham, tell me what you make of this?"

"Have we traitors here?" said Oswald de Burgh, looking round darkly. "By Heaven! it is more than passing strange."

"But, in any case, the rebels cannot be far away," Prince John rejoined. "We'll enter the castle, leave some of our soldiers to guard it, and then hasten in pursuit. Ho, there! Banners advance!"

"Prince," Oswald de Burgh whispered, "have a care, and let not your anger lead to rashness, lest you fall into an ambuscade."

"You speak wisely," the prince replied. "Baron Delamaine shall take the lead."

The baron proudly accepted the honour imposed on him. He was a fierce and warlike man, and he had yearned to distinguish himself in the prince's eyes, and now the chance had come. Riding to the front, he threw his warder into the air and bade all follow.

On rushed the troopers, the men-at-

arms scampering after them. Yelling, "Brave Robin Hood, where are you?" they poured upon the drawbridge, until it was choked with horse and foot. Then Baron Delmaine, to his horror, saw Little John.

Axe in hand, the giant appeared under the archway, snorting defiance at the advancing host.

Crash! crash! went Little John's axe upon the machinery that raised and lowered the drawbridge.

The baron saw what must happen, and turned as pale as death.

"Back! back! or we are lost!" he shrieked. "By Hades! the drawbridge will fall. Kill me that villain! Strike the axe from his hand! Oh mercy——"

A swinging stroke from Little John's axe severed the last rope, the blocks and pulleys flew high up, and the great mass of beams upon which the Normans stood lurched forward into the moat.

Men and horses followed in dire confusion, falling over each other in one struggling, shrieking, maddening chaos.

Scarcely a dozen out of full sixty Normans contrived to scramble back, and they, sick at heart and panic-stricken at the awful scene they had witnessed, flung away their weapons and fled.

Prince John heard the crash, followed by the wild and frantic cries, but could not comprehend what had happened until, passing beyond some trees, he came in sight of the castle gates and the ghastly void beyond. Then his heart misgave him, and in accents of horror he cried:

"This is surely not the work of man!"

"See yonder," Oswald de Burgh exclaimed, pointing. "There stands Robin Hood and some of his villains, gibing and bidding us follow the brave men who have gone to their doom."

At that moment an arrow whizzed so close to them that the rush of air seemed to sting their faces.

"Let us away, sir!" cried Oswald de Burgh in terror. "The rebels are manning the outer walls and pouring shafts upon us."

As they turned and retreated arrows were hissing in the air and dropping in

all directions. One struck Oswald de Burgh on his right shoulder, piercing his armour and inflicting a painful wound.

"Oh, I am slain!" he cried. "Help! Hold me, or I fall!"

"What a miserable coward the dog is!" Prince John muttered as he spurred his horse savagely. "At the sight of a few drops of blood he faints like a woman. Ho! there, men! Keep apart! These rebels shoot as none else in all England know how to."

CHAPTER 3.

The Betrayal of Little John.

ROBIN HOOD, knowing how impossible it would be for him to remain at Leabourne Castle for any length of time, determined ere leaving it to convince Prince John that he had come on a dangerous errand.

The outlaws knew that the Normans' flight was now due to a sudden panic, and that they would soon return, construct rafts, and force a way across the moat, no matter at what cost to themselves.

Now, then, was the time to inflict a further blow on them, and take once more to the forest.

Some planks were placed where the drawbridge had fallen at one end, and Robin Hood, crossing the temporary bridge to that portion of the larger one that had remained stationary, led his men into open action.

His men answered gleefully enough. Throwing their doublets in a heap, and leaving them in charge of Friar Tuck, they bared their arms and sent a withering flight of arrows into the broken ranks of the Normans.

The men on horseback soon got out of range, but those on foot, bewildered at the unexpected onslaught, flung themselves down and crawled like slaves out of danger.

The conflict came to an end, and Robin Hood withdrew his men behind the walls of the castle.

"A splendid victory this," said Friar Tuck as he helped Sir Henry's henchmen to serve the foresters with food and drink. "I trow that Prince John

will wear thicker armour when he ventures forth again."

"Saw you Oswald de Burgh reel in the saddle and howl like a stuck porker?" Little John demanded. "Who shot that arrow?"

"Much the Miller's son," answered Robin Hood. "Give me your hand, Much. Had you not been quite so nervous you would have rid me of my greatest enemy and the world of a tyrant. But you did well and bravely!"

Much the Miller's son was tall and broad and strong, but he blushed like a girl at his chief's compliment.

"I'll do better next time," he said.

"Well, let the sheriff go for the nonce," Robin Hood said. "He has had but a slight taste of what is to come. We'll to the forest at sundown, and find our comrades if we can."

Prince John withdrew his men to a thick cover beyond a river, and was in no mood for any more fighting that day.

Oswald de Burgh lay under a tent, groaning and complaining at everything that was done for him. When his shoulder swelled he believed that he had been struck by a poisoned arrow, and cried out that he would die, and begged the attendance of a priest.

"Out upon you for a puling!" cried Prince John. "There is not a boy in all England but would laugh at such a scratch. A priest, say you? By St. Christopher, if it were in my power, I'd send for Friar Tuck; and methinks that he would do the shriving quickly, and to his own satisfaction."

Having expressed himself thus the prince turned away and met Strong-i'-the-arm.

"So, my valiant giant," he said, "you came scathless out of the fight? But how an arrow missed you I know not. Perchance you found a tree of greater girth than yourself, and watched the fray from behind it."

"By Pluto!" Strong-i'-the-arm retorted, "I fought while others fled on horseback. As for wounds—see here."

He tore open his doublet and showed where two arrows had glanced, inflicting ugly flesh wounds.

"I forgive your insolence," the prince said, "and doubt not but that you are

a good fellow. Perchance I may require a service of you; but the time is not ripe to speak of it. But this I'll promise now—bring me the head of Robin Hood or Little John, and I'll make you as rich as any noble in the land."

"Reward or no reward," said Strong-i'-the-arm, "my blood is on fire to meet Little John again. The world is not large enough to hold both of us!"

"See that you keep your word," the prince responded. "I will speak with you of other matters anon."

When the day had gone a dark and cloudy night set in. Under its cover Robin Hood and his merry men, with Sir Henry Angerstein, withdrew silently from the castle and dived deep into the forest.

Sheltered by some cavernous rocks, the outlaw chief and his followers felt but little discomfort. They had made a hasty meal, and the majority lay sleeping, while the scouts searched everywhere for the reinforcement of foresters expected by Robin Hood.

"Some mishap must have delayed them," Robin said to Little John. "Our good friend, Tom Ringer, is a Yorkshireman, and no man knows the forest better. Hence I appointed him as their guide."

"There are four sides to the forest," Little John replied; "and it is impossible to say which they may have entered. Bide awhile in peace, and take the rest you need."

"You speak not of fatigue yourself."

"Because I feel it not," the giant said. "Sleep, I pray you! A weary chief is worse than a weary army. What to-morrow may bring forth we cannot say; but you must be fresh and active."

Robin Hood drew his cloak around him and stretched himself at full length under a tree.

Little John stood motionless, watching his chief until he was satisfied that he slumbered; then he stole up to Friar Tuck, who sat with his head between his knees, snoring unmelodiously, and touched him on the shoulder.

The friar awoke with a start. He had been dreaming uncomfortably, and

believing that the enemy had come he seized his quarter-staff.

"Hush!" said Little John, placing a huge hand over Tuck's mouth. "It is I. You know my voice. Listen!"

"Take your bear's paws from my face, or I choke!" the monk mumbled. "How now, baby? Could you not let me sleep in peace?"

"Heaven! will your tongue never cease wagging? Listen, I say. Our chief is in great distress of mind about the men who were to arrive under Tom Ringer's guidance. I am going to see what has become of them."

"You! And alone?"

"Yes, alone," Little John replied. "Robin is worn out and will sleep for hours. He must not know that I have undertaken this mission without consulting him; but I cannot rest until I learn the truth."

Friar Tuck shook his head.

"I fear mischief will come of this," he said. "Yet have it your own way, lad, and rely on my silence. But why go alone? I am old, and a man of peace; still——"

"Better lose one than two, if it must be so," Little John interrupted. "I would not make this venture did I not know that Robin's heart was aching sorely. He fears that our fellows have fallen into a trap."

"Go, then, and take with you the blessing of every man that knows your worth, faithful John."

Another moment, and the giant was gone.

At first he proceeded slowly and cautiously, but soon he increased his pace, and strode out, crushing down brake and brier as though they were but tender grass.

"Jog on! Jog on!" muttered Little John. "The end of the forest must come at last. The Normans are to the west; my own brave comrades lie to the east, and I am going north. Heaven send that I may have good news to take back!"

To keep up his spirits, and forget the rain and wind that lashed and buffeted him, the giant drew a bright picture of the result of his journey. He would—so he told himself—come upon Tom

Ringer and the men, and together they would return in joyful company.

Suddenly out of the gloom there came the twinkling of a light.

Little John stopped and stared in astonishment, scarcely believing his own eyes, for right ahead of him lay what appeared to be a village scattered in a dale and upon some rising ground.

The place was unknown to him, and he could come to no other conclusion than that, by some unaccountable means, he had wandered completely out of the direction he intended to take.

"Had I been in Sherwood Forest," he growled, "this wouldn't have happened, and even here I did not think that I could be so deceived, for Barnesdale and I are no strangers. But what place is this? It seems to have sprung up in a single night. Well, I must inquire."

Striding up to the nearest building, a low-roofed hut, he knocked gently at the door, fearing that a loud application of his knuckles would alarm the inmates.

Presently the door opened, and the orange glow of a fire fell upon him, silhouetting the figure of a man, who, swinging a bar of iron in his hand, asked what he wanted.

"Friend," said Little John civilly, "it will be as well if I come in, for it is hard to answer questions with drops of rain larger than silver pennies splashing into my ears."

"Come in, then," replied the man, moving on one side. "I am only a charcoal burner, but if your intents be dishonest, I'll fell you, big and brawny though you be."

"There is no logic in calling a man a thief because he happens to be taller and broader than most men," Little John said, laughing as he stooped under the doorway. "Fear nothing from me but kindness—ay, and in a shape that will buy you better comforts than I see here. Is there no one here but yourself?"

"I live alone. I have no wife, for I do not earn enough to support one. I am known as Asgard."

"Ha! A Norman name that."

"I have forgotten to care whether I am Norman, Saxon, or Dane," Asgard

replied, seating himself on a roughly-made stool. "What is birth to me? I was born in a ditch, so they say, and that both my father and mother were put to death for stealing when they could not live by begging."

"A strange fellow this!" thought Little John, leaning against the smoke-begrimed wall.

"Well," said Asgard, "what do you require of me?"

"I have lost my way; so shelter first, and information afterwards, if you can," the giant replied. "There is no need to scowl. I have food in this wallet and wine in this leather flask, and you shall share both with me. Come, put on a better face. Let us see if a broad piece of silver will help you to it."

Asgard took the coin and turned it over and over, as if doubting its genuineness.

"Are you a nobleman that you give money in this way?" he asked.

"I am what you see me—a man, and nothing more."

Asgard laughed hoarsely as he hid the piece of money in his ragged jerkin.

"I have heard of a man of your stature whom some love and others fear. Down Nottingham way they call him Little John. Are you that man?"

"I should lie if I were to deny it," the giant replied. "And now, since you know so much, let us understand each other. I lost my way, it is true, but not far off I have many friends."

"Oh, news travels with the wind even through the forest," Asgard said. "I have heard of what happened at Leabourne Castle, and how the proud prince was compelled to withdraw his fine men in armour before a few archers. The tale made me laugh."

"And yet you are a Norman!" said Little John, swinging his heavy sword round and resting it on his knees.

"Phsaw!" Asgard answered, snapping his fingers. "All men are alike to me. I work because I must eat. You saw the lights of houses before you came to mine? Well, I tell you that not one man, woman, or child dwelling in any of them speak to me. They hate me, and I hate them!"

"A wretched life!" said Little John.

"They made it what it is, and made me what I am. They hold me accursed, but I care not. You have given me money, and I have nothing to give you back but my thanks."

"Stay, I am not so sure of that," Little John said. "I came in search of a band of travellers. Have you heard aught of them?"

"I heard of certain men, who, when hearing that Robin Hood had shut himself up in Sir Henry Angerstein's castle, fell back some miles, fearing that they were not strong enough in numbers to break through the Norman host."

"They must be the men I seek," Little John said. "Can you guide me to them?"

"At dawn the task will not be a hard one," Asgard replied; "but your hands filled with gold would not tempt me to do it until then. What a night it is! Hark to the rain and wind! I'd not stir even though I were to be made a prince!"

"How far do you reckon these men are away?" Little John demanded.

"Three leagues, at the least. You look astonished, and wonder how I know all this. Do you know, Zillah, the witch?"

"Heaven forbid!" Little John ejaculated. "I seek not the knowledge of anyone dealing with the dark arts."

"Zillah is the only being that says a kind word to me," Asgard said. "She told me all this."

Little John went to the door and looked out.

The rain was coming down in torrents, and the wind was increasing in force every moment.

"You are right," he said, going back to the fire. "It would be madness to attempt a journey in such weather, and I am lucky in finding myself here. Now, friend, we'll empty wallet and flask, and if you give me leave to rest upon the floor I'll be content."

"My bed is in the next room."

"But I'll not rob you of it," said Little John. "I've slept too often on the bare earth to be afraid that my bones will ache. Stay! Is there another door at the back?"

"I see you are cautious, thinking that I might be tempted to betray you. Rest easy. Yonder door is the only one in the house, and I doubt not but that you will guard it, sleeping or waking."

"In good truth I have never found it wise to trust a man with Norman blood in his veins; but you I will pay, and handsomely, too. But beware——"

"Spare yourself the utterance of idle words," Asgard said. "Had I so willed, I could have brought you down as you stood at my door."

As he spoke he pitched his bar of iron contemptuously into a corner, saying in continuation:

"I am hungry, and talking has made me dry. Give me something to eat."

While Little John emptied the wallet of dried venison, white bread, and wholemeal cakes, Asgard produced two wooden trenchers and two horns.

"Years have gone since I had company," he said as he began to eat wolfishly.

Little John poured the wine into the horns, and was in the act of drinking when Asgard held up his hand.

"What's that?" he demanded. "I could swear that I heard a footstep."

He turned pale, even through the grime on his face, and trembled from head to foot.

"Come, rouse yourself," Little John said. "What ails you, man? At the worst, it can be only some passer-by. Go and see."

"I dare not," Asgard gasped. "Listen at the door, and if you hear the footsteps of more than one man I'll hide you in the inner room and put out the fire."

"Heaven help the man who calls himself foe and attempts to enter," said Little John, drawing his sword as he went to the door.

As he stood with his ear close to the woodwork, Asgard passed his hand quickly over the giant's wine.

"I may have been mistaken," he said. "The wind plays strange freaks. The snapping of rotten twigs made me fancy I heard footsteps, perchance."

"I hear nothing but the wind and the rain, and they are making a merry night of it," Little John said grimly.

Returning, he took his share of the provisions, and then raising the horn to his lips said:

"Asgard, your health, although you are a Norman. If in the morn you serve me well, I'll guarantee you more silver pieces than you have fingers and toes."

"My thanks to you, burly Saxon!" Asgard replied, drinking, too.

They finished the meal in silence, and then Asgard, stretching his arms above his head, said, yawning:

"I'll to bed. Eating and drinking of your fare has made me lazy. How seems it with you?"

"I'll to rest, too, after I have secured the door to my liking," Little John replied.

There were several large pieces of wood, ready to be sawn into logs, lying about, and Little John, having planted them at angles and tested their power of resistance, bade Asgard "good-night" and flung himself down in front of the fire.

The flames seemed to dance before his eyes in a strange manner. They took the oldest of forms—fairies, goblins, men in armour, and men in Lincoln green, all dancing, whirling, and twirling madly.

"The saints defend me," said the giant, raising himself on his elbow. "Am I bewitched? Ho! there, Asgard! come, put out this fire! The very fiend is in it, and I——"

His elbow slipped from under him, his head fell heavily forward on his arm, and he slept.

Poor Little John had been drugged. Soon came Asgard, with a devilish grin on his face.

"A fig for your silver money," he said, snapping his fingers at the unconscious man. "I know where to fill my cap over-brimming with gold. Sleep on, great fool! All the wind that ever blew, and the thunder that shakes the rocks to their foundations, will not wake you."

Throwing down the barricade, he rushed out and, putting a horn to his lips, sounded call after call upon it.

Soon the light of torches began to flash in the distance. Then came Nor-

man soldiers by the dozen, and some of these entered the hut.

"There lies Little John," said Asgard, rubbing his hands. "Deliver him to your prince, and say that I will call in the morning for my reward."

"This foul weather has driven the prince to the town of Maxbridge for shelter," one of the men said; "but Oswald de Burgh remains in camp."

"It's all one and the same thing to me," Asgard replied. "I care not who has the handling of him, so that I am paid for his capture. 'Twas well done, I promise you, although had he seen me drug his wine this head of mine would now lie upon the floor."

CHAPTER 4.

Tom Ringer to the Rescue.

THERE was a great sound like the roaring of the sea, that soon resolved itself into peal after peal of laughter.

Little John heard, but could not comprehend. His eyelids refused to open, and he could only conjecture the meaning of the uproarious merriment.

Something must have happened to amuse his comrades like that. Perhaps it was the sight of himself lying there so stupidly and like a log. Had he taken too much wine overnight and fallen asleep in some odd place? But where? And wait! Dull as his ears were just then, the voices all seemed strange to him.

And, stranger still, he was not lying on the ground. He was standing on his feet and leaning forward, with his great arms swaying before him.

Then Little John remembered the journey through the forest, his arrival at the charcoal-burner's hut, the dancing figures in the fire; and forcing his eyes open he saw what had happened.

He was bound to a tree, and all round him were Norman soldiers capering and shouting in their glee.

"Good-morning, Sir Woolpack," said one. "I bid you welcome, and regret that we have not a feather bed to spare. You slept well, I trow, by the way you snored. By Pluto! they heard you at the next village, and swore that all the swine were bewitched."

Little John pulled himself together, although there was a raging pain in his heart, and his head was so hot and swollen that it seemed fit to burst.

"So," he said, speaking calmly, "you have caught me by a trick. Well, I am content, if you will only act like men. Here is my head—take it; and when it once parts from my body I care not on what pole you raise it."

"Gramercy!" said an esquire, strutting about like a turkey cock; "surely you do not think that the killing of you out of hand would be a just compensation for all the lives you have taken? Wait until you see Oswald de Burgh and listen to the blessing he will bestow on you!"

"You pack of curs!" cried Little John. "I defy you! Cut these bonds, and I will fight any six of you!"

"My faith!" retorted the pert esquire, "you will find one more than sufficient presently. Behold him!"

Little John's tormentors fell back as Oswald de Burgh and Strong-i'-the-arm came striding along.

"So, rebel," said the sheriff, sneering, "you are caught in the toils this time! Believe me, no other chance to do mischief will be given you."

As the giant vainly strained at the ropes, Strong-i'-the-arm dropped his hunting spear and, throwing himself on the grass, made the air hideous with his laughter.

"Ho, ho!" cried the rival giant, "see what a temper he is in! Pull away—tug away, Little John! I so trussed you up that I trow you'll not get loose unless you pull the tree up by its roots!"

"A fig for your scoffs!" Little John bellowed. "You are but a mountebank, in the hire of a counterfeit nobleman! Sheriff, I fear not torture or death; but I do fear dying without getting a blow at you. A blight on you, villain, and a blight on the crawling reptile that delivered me into your hands!"

"He means Asgard. Good Asgard!" Strong-i'-the-arm shouted. "We'll have him here presently."

"Your eyes shall feast on him," Oswald de Burgh said, scowling at his

prisoner. "He is a charcoal-burner, and knows how to build such a fire as will reduce even you to ashes. But not yet—not yet."

Finding that his struggles were of no avail, Little John, exhausted and with streams of perspiration pouring down his face, leaned heavily back.

"You miserable hound!" he hissed. "Do your worst!"

"Silence him!" said the sheriff.

Strong-i'-the-arm leaped to his feet, thrust a huge gag into the captive's mouth, and tied it with a thick scarf.

Asgard, the betrayer, soon came up. He was now clad in red, and wore a cap with a long feather.

"When next I send for you," the sheriff said, watching the effect his devilish speech would have on Little John, "bring your faggots and torch ready for lighting."

"I promise you that there shall be a rare roasting," Asgard replied, grinning.

"In the meantime," Oswald de Burgh continued, "some of my good men are inclined for a little sport. Ho! there, bowmen! Shoot at this big target, but be careful not to hit it in a vital part."

A Norman, taking his bow, measured twenty paces, and laughing at the hapless prisoner, fitted an arrow and drew the string to his shoulder.

The string snapped, striking the Norman smartly across the face, and the arrow dropped at his feet.

"The Evil One thinks to befriend his child," said Oswald de Burgh. "Try another bow."

At that moment the pert esquire, who was watching the scene with great enjoyment, suddenly spun round and, without giving a word of warning, took to his heels.

"What ails the stripling?" Oswald de Burgh demanded.

In another moment he knew.

Out of the forest, and at no great distance, there came a cry that struck terror into his heart.

"Forward, there! To the rescue! Bow and bill. Aim true and strike hard! Ho, for Robin Hood! Death to Normans!"

Tom Ringer and the men Robin

Hood had so long expected burst on the scene.

Oswald de Burgh was the first to fly, and Strong-i'-the-arm blundered after him, roaring, "Horses! horses! Where are the horses?"

Half a dozen voices that would have answered him were silenced for ever as the foresters, maddened at the sight of Little John's pitiable state, rushed upon his persecutors.

The dismay of the Normans was complete. Some ran, others fell upon their knees and begged for mercy, and these the foresters spurned aside with contempt.

Asgard, the traitor, was the only one who showed fight.

Snatching up the hunting-spear which Strong-i'-the-arm had forgotten to take with him, he set his back against a tree and prepared to sell his life dearly.

Tom Ringer, a handsome young fellow, singled him out as if knowing by intuition that he had taken a leading part in Little John's misery.

Tom, sword in hand, rushed at Asgard, and, warding off a furious thrust, responded with a sweeping cut that placed the villain beyond the power of doing further harm.

Meanwhile Little John was liberated, but his strength had failed him, and he lay panting at the foot of the tree to which he had been bound.

"My poor John," said Tom Ringer, sinking down at the giant's side and clasping his hand, "it rends my heart to see you like this. The beasts, to torture you thus!"

"Think little of it," Little John replied. "Give me a drink from your flask, and I shall be myself again. You are a good lad, Tom, and neither Robin Hood nor I will forget you."

"I thank Heaven that we arrived in time," Tom Ringer replied modestly. "and that is sufficient reward for all of us. Come, John, stand on your feet. There! that is better. You are worth a score dead men yet."

"What says the law of old?" Little John cried, stretching his arms, cruelly swollen by the biting cords, above his head. "An eye for an eye, and a tooth

for a tooth. I'll have revenge—revenge! Had they taken and killed me in battle, it would have been but fair, but to torture me——”

Tom Ringer interrupted him:

“Keep your wrath for the time when you meet these rascals face to face. Pouring out your anger on empty air will do no good, but much harm, for we must away, and you need all your strength. But hark! What are those sounds? Surely the Normans are returning.”

“Ay! and Robin Hood is at their heels,” cried Little John. “Give me a sword—an axe—anything that will—— Listen! Are you deaf? Know you not that shout?—‘Sweet liberty or death!’ It is our battle-cry.”

The Normans had been caught between two fires. But luck served Oswald de Burgh and Strong-i'-the-arm; they contrived to escape just as Robin Hood and his archers came up.

“No Normans! Sweet liberty or death!” the outlaw chief cried, making his voice ring again. “Think of Sherwood! Death to the tyrant sheriff!”

The whizzing arrows cut through chain-mail and leather jerkin, and the Normans who did not fall scattered and slunk away in terror.

CHAPTER 5.

A Great Discovery by Friar Tuck.— In the Enemy's Camp.

BARNESDALE FOREST was scarcely less lovely than Sherwood. It was full of beautiful hills, where the white and red heather grew knee-deep, and dales were soft with yielding moss.

The oak, ash, and elm had flourished for hundreds of years, and bowed their leafy heads and strong trunks to the earth, but only to give place to others, and from end to end the forest teemed with ground and winged game.

Many of the Norman rangers had never travelled half through the wild region; hence it was not difficult for Robin Hood to baffle his enemies.

One morning the outlaw chief went out hunting with some of his men. The day passed and evening came, and

anxiety at his non-return increased with the gathering gloom.

Friar Tuck, quarter-staff in hand, paced up and down as restlessly as a caged tiger, and at length climbed into the higher branches of an oak. There for some time he sat, listening with his hand to his ear, and at length the echo of a blast from a horn brought a broad smile to his face.

“No man in the world but Robin Hood can blow a horn like that!” he said joyfully. “Still, something of an unusual character must have delayed him. Ho! there, lads!” he shouted, “our chief is coming! Prepare to meet him with welcome and good food, for I trow that Robin and all with him are nearly famished!”

As the jolly friar swung his legs over the branch that had supported him, it broke off close to the trunk, and down he went.

The foresters roared with laughter as they heard the lower branches giving way under his weight, and ran to catch him.

But they were spared the trouble. Silence followed the sound caused by the friar's fall, and believing that he might have lodged in a forked branch and received a nasty knock, the mirth ceased, and several climbed into the tree.

The friar, however, was not to be seen. It was most mysterious, and the foresters, as they swung from branch to branch, looked at each other in mute amazement.

“By our Lady!” gasped Ned Carter. “It would seem that Friar Tuck has melted into thin air! What, in the name of all that is wonderful, can have become of him?”

“Perhaps he is hiding, to give us a fright,” Tom Ringer suggested.

“Hide! Where can he hide?” Ned demanded. “Pass a lantern up here.”

Then the voice of the friar was heard, but so muffled that it seemed to come from under the earth.

“I am here,” said the friar. “No bones broken, I think; but I am jolted to a jelly.”

“Where—where?” Ned Carter asked. “Under the tree.”

By this time the lantern was lit and passed up.

"The tree is hollow," Ned exclaimed, "and he has gone clean through it. Lads, go and meet our chief! With the aid of a rope, Tom and I will get Friar Tuck up."

"Lower the lantern; fix the rope and come down yourselves," cried the friar, in a clearer tone of voice. "Thanks to the saints, I bumped on something soft, rolled down, and here I am. A light, quick! an you love me; for no vault was ever darker than this place!"

Ned Carter and Tom Ringer soon made the necessary preparations.

By the light of the lantern they saw several projections, thickly overgrown with moss, in the cavity, and apparently having been purposely made.

Ned Carter, holding the ring of the lantern between his teeth, went down the rope hand over hand, and his feet had scarcely touched solid earth when Tom Ringer joined him.

A few paces away sat Friar Tuck, covered with dust, moss, and pieces of touchwood; and hugging his knees in his arms, but apparently little the worse for his strange accident.

Friar Tuck had made a great discovery, and some moments passed before Ned Carter and Tom Ringer could speak.

They found themselves in a large chamber, leading into a still vaster one, and from this they could see by the lantern-light several passages running.

"Lads," said Friar Tuck, rising, "I care not a groat for my tumble down, although it has left bruises which I shall not get rid of for many a day. This was the work of the Druids, and here we shall have neither fear of the Normans nor foul weather."

"But I do not understand," Ned Carter said, in awe-struck tones. "The Druids, I have heard, made their temples in the forest, and lived under vast bowers which they trained."

"True," the friar replied. "But they lived underground in the winter-time, for, like us, they were but men."

This conversation had been carried on in hushed tones, but suddenly Friar Tuck lifted up his powerful voice.

"Ho, ho!" he shouted.

All three started back in alarm, for there came a number of awful sepulchral echoes, loud and booming at first, and then dying away to mere whispers.

"This is no place for us," Ned Carter said. "Let us away from it, lest gaunt spirits of the departed appear and drive us mad."

"Fear nothing, silly boy," the friar said. "I have seen you ply bow and sword as well as the best, and you are not made of the stuff to be frightened by sound. Surely you have heard echoes enough in the forest?"

"Ay, but never such echoes as these."

"Because there have been no places such as we see to send them back," Friar Tuck rejoined. "But you are right; we must go and acquaint Robin Hood—who, perchance, is riding over our heads by this time."

Tom Ringer shivered, and looked fearfully around.

"You are a good man and ought to know," he said, "but I'd not stay here for all the gold in the world."

As they came one by one from out of the hollow tree, Robin Hood and his men came riding by. He had heard of Friar Tuck's fall, but never dreamed that it had resulted in anything more than his being wedged in the hollow.

Gladly he greeted the jolly monk.

"In a strange way," he said, "you have done us a grand service. We'll live under the greenwood tree while we can, but if hard pressed we'll not forget to take to these mysterious hiding-places. I have heard my father talk of such, saying that the Druids hid their wealth in these great burrowings. But we'll talk of this anon. These good men and I have been within a mile of the enemy's camp."

"It is like him," Friar Tuck muttered. "Robin is never happy unless he is almost within arm's-length of some great danger."

"We are starving," Robin Hood continued, "but as recompense we have brought great news: To supper first, and then we'll sit and talk by the light of the moon."

"And you escaped without cracking your crown?" said Little John to the

friar, pitching to the ground a heap of game he had carried on his shoulders. "Not a scratch—only a few bruises. Ha, ha!"

"What makes you laugh, ponderous loon?" Friar Tuck demanded.

"There is something in being a monk, after all," Little John replied. "Had it been my case there would not have been a whole bone left in the skin."

"The way of transgressors is hard, and the sinful always suffer," the friar retorted. "What is that I see? A fawn! A young and tender fawn—a flower of the forest. What wickedness to kill such a thing!"

"You'll not say so when you take a sniff at the stew-pot to-morrow," Little John said.

The hunting-party, having satisfied their appetites, all gathered in a circle to hear what Robin Hood had to say.

"As I told you," he said, "we have been so near the enemy's camp that at times when the wind blew our way we could hear the sound of the Normans' voices. They were extremely merry, which shows that some devilry is going on among them. To-morrow I go boldly into the camp, and shall take but one man with me."

"Which means death to you both," Friar Tuck remarked.

"Prepare for death, then," said the outlaw, "for you are the very man I had in my mind when I spoke."

"I'll go with you, though I had twenty good lives to lose," the friar responded. "What matter would be the loss of such an old man as I? But you, Robin, look before you leap."

"I shall walk," said the outlaw. "I have said enough. Be ready, as Little John shall direct you at dawn, and haste to load the ass with two sacks of corn."

Friar Tuck glanced at Little John, but could read nothing from the expression of the giant's face.

"I'll now to rest," Robin Hood said, "and all, save those who watch, will do best to follow my example."

"Child," whispered Friar Tuck, catching at Little John's doublet as he walked away, "what does this mean?"

"It means," replied the giant, "that to-morrow you will doff cassock and

sandals. That is all I shall tell you. And now to sleep; and, by Morpheus, you look as if you needed it. You blink like an owl in the sunlight, and yawn like your ass Balaam when he pours out his heart in the music of his kind."

"Poor Balaam! How they scoff at you!" the friar said, looking in the direction where the donkey was tethered. "Heed them not, lover of thistles. Ass though you be, you have done much in the cause of freedom, and may do more. Good-night, sweet creature, and may your dreams——"

"To bed—to bed!" Little John interrupted.

"To bed let it be," replied Tuck. "Good-night, John, and don't forget to call me early."

It was scarcely daylight when the giant, having poured quantities of water over his head, and rasped his face with a hempen towel until it shone like the red sun of a winter morn, went to a small cave where the stores were kept. Here there were large quantities of apparel, some rich, some coarse, and of all sizes. Selecting two sets of clothing suitable for a shepherd and a miller, Little John awoke Friar Tuck.

"Out of your cassock and into the miller's frock, shoes, and hose," he said.

"What, I play the part of a white-faced meal-grinder!" the friar cried, aghast. "Fore Heaven, it is an insult to——"

"You will insult Robin Hood if you do not obey."

"Consider it done. Bacchus! what a picture I shall be in such clothes and that broad-brimmed hat! All white, save in the face, and, as I live by food, that will look like a bunch of blazing poppies. Here's an adventure. If I ever live to see this day out, I'll mark it deeply on the tablets of my memory."

Scarcely had Friar Tuck effected the transformation in himself when Robin Hood, clad as a shepherd and carrying a crook, came jauntily to his side.

"Greetings, friend Grist," said the outlaw chief.

"That is the name I am known by! Faith, 'tis as good and appropriate as any I could think of. I'll call you Green an I forget it not."

"You'll not forget it if you think of the greenwood tree we love so well," Robin said. "Tell me, would you have known me?"

"I swear by my troth that I should not."

"Nor I you," the outlaw rejoined. "You are the miller to perfection, but I would you had a broader speech."

"It shall be broad enough when the time comes," Friar Tuck said. "How, now, what ails Balaam? He is crying like a spoilt child."

"Heaven help the child that is born to make such a noise," Robin said. "Go to the ass; he objects to those sacks of corn being placed on his back."

Friar Tuck picked up a switch and, running up to Balaam, gave him a smart cut by way of teaching him manners.

The donkey gazed at his assailant, and, failing to recognise him, ran open-mouthed at him.

"What! ungrateful wretch as ever gnawed through a halter-rope," roared the friar, darting behind a tree, "would you catch your own master between your jaws? Would you bite the hand that has fed you a thousand times?"

"Hee-haw! hee-haw!" Balaam brayed, kicking up his heels in delight at the sound of the friar's voice.

"If that is the way he laughs," Little John said, "I wish he would weep. King Pan and all his attendants made not such a din even when learning how to play the pipes."

"One word," said Robin Hood, touching the giant on the shoulder. "Remember."

"I'll not forget, chief. Fear not; I'm only too anxious to meet my rival. Would that I had him here now."

"Your eyes may look into his sooner than you think. Come, friend Grist; it is time that we struck for the path that leads through the forest."

"I am with you Green," the friar replied. "Stay! May a miller carry a quarter-staff, as well as a sword and dagger under his frock?"

"Yes," Robin Hood replied; "but let him be careful how he handles it. If he twists it in the air, balances it on

his chin, and catches it dancing on his foot as I have seen you do, there will be mischief if strangers see. Use it as means of support and no more."

"Then take me not too near Norman heads," Friar Tuck said. "I am ready. Ho, there, and away! Come, Balaam, lovely roamer of hill and dale; we'll go where brave Robin Hood may lead us."

The disguised outlaw chief waved his hand to the foresters, who gave him a ringing cheer, and once more he turned and, looking meaningfully at Little John, said:

"Remember."

"May the Normans carry out their threat and burn me if I fail," Little John replied, looking rather nettled. "Have I ever proved neglectful? Have I ever caused you to doubt my fidelity?"

"Nay, friend John, truest of men," Robin replied. "Take not my warning with so ill a meaning. The best of us make mistakes. See that you make sure in all you do. I'll ask no more than that."

"The man who first made shoes had a spite against his own feet," Friar Tuck said, when the trees had hidden the foresters from view. "Give me back my sandals, and let my toes be free."

Robin Hood let him grunt and groan to his heart's content. He was in the mood to humour the friar, knowing how odd the exchange of garments must make him feel; but soon Friar Tuck cooled down and trudged along as sturdily as his companion.

Their wallets had been carefully and plentifully packed, and their flasks filled by the ever-thoughtful Little John, and so, when they had covered ten good miles, they sat down to enjoy their well-earned breakfast.

"And now," said Robin Hood, "I will tell you why you and I are to enter the enemy's camp. I am anxious to know whether Prince John has returned to London or Nottingham, and, if so, what number of men Oswold de Burgh has under him. Friar, it will be strange to me if I do not capture this villain again, within a few days, and slay him with my own hands."

"Heaven grant it as a mercy to the world," Friar Tuck responded piously.

"But listen, good Robin! Here we are alone, and alone we are going into the midst of such as yearn to hack us to pieces. I complain not of that, for, as I have said, I am with you in all things. But were there not other means to avert such a risk? Now, supposing this hat, which I wish at the bottom of the Red Sea, was to blow off and leave bare my shorn crown——"

Robin Hood interrupted him with a peal of laughter.

"I can imagine how surprised the Normans would be," he said.

"I can imagine that they would do something surprising to me," said the friar, screwing up his mouth until it looked like a red button. "But who comes here?"

The outlaw chief was starting to his feet when Friar Tuck laid his hand on his arm.

"'Tis but a woman," he whispered.

"Why could you not say so at first?" Robin replied angrily. "By our Lady! I thought that the Norman scouts had sighted us. But where be this woman—or, perchance, man in disguise?"

"The trees hide her just now, but she will appear again."

Then Robin Hood saw her. She was a woman past the middle age, and wore the simple attire of a yeoman's wife. Her eyes were filled with tears, and as she walked swiftly, yet seemingly not knowing where she was going, she wrung her hands and sighed.

"She is in great distress," Robin Hood said; "I'll speak to her."

"Let her come a little nearer, so that I can see that she has no followers," muttered the friar warningly.

The woman came on until she was within a few paces of the bush behind which Robin Hood and Friar Tuck had taken the precaution to crouch.

"Good dame," said Robin Hood kindly, raising his head and shoulders, "tell us what ails you. We are honest fellows, and will help you if we can."

The woman started back, and would have fled but for Robin Hood leaping to his feet and detaining her.

"By the rood," he said, "you mistake us. We respect and honour womanhood. Do you not see that I am but a

shepherd and my companion a miller? Yet I trow we are not without the means of assisting you, if it be poverty that brings tears into your eyes."

At that moment Balaam, having finished his breakfast, and growing tired of being tethered a distance from his master, brayed loudly.

"Your pardon, honest shepherd, and yours, too, miller," the woman said. "I am in dire distress, and my heart is full of sorrow. I seek a man whose name I scarce dare utter, lest my troubles increase."

"You may trust us," Robin Hood said. "I swear it by the lady who bore me!"

"I have heard that Robin Hood is in this forest," the woman replied, "and that he never turns a deaf ear to a story of woe."

"That may be true or false," said Friar Tuck. "I have seen this Robin Hood more than once in my life, but he has different moods. Listen, woman. Were I you, I'd not seek the outlaw if you have taken Norman gold to act as spy."

"A curse on their gold!" cried the woman, her eyes blazing with sudden wrath. "Listen, you two, and ask yourselves if my mission is a false one. I am Margaret Stutely, a widow and mother of three sons. They have supported me by tilling the soil of a small freehold left by my husband——"

Then the woman broke down, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"Courage, good dame," said Robin Hood. "Say on, and fear not. Perchance the man you seek is not so far off as you think."

"My three sons, Arthur, Egbert, and Edgar, saw no harm in slaying such deer as came upon my land and destroyed the crops; but Oswald de Burgh, who they say is Sheriff of Nottingham, has seized my three boys, and swears that they shall be put to death before the sun sets."

"But is there no lord of the Manor of Barnesdale?" Robin Hood demanded.

"Yes, a feeble old man with no mind of his own," Margaret Stutely replied. "But even if he were inclined to favour

above the heads of the people he looked towards the forest and saw something flutter from the top of a tree that was no part of it.

"Giant," said Robin Hood, "lend me the horn that hangs at your back, and let me sound some notes."

"For what purpose?" Strong-i-the-arm demanded suspiciously.

"To proclaim that the law has triumphed over doers of evil!" Robin replied.

"Take it, then," said Strong-i-the-arm; "but delay no longer, for the sheriff is growing impatient."

Three blasts Robin Hood blew, and then tossing the horn to its owner he seized Arthur Stutely by the arm and, pointing to the ladder, said:

"Now, Sir Deer-stealer, the hour for your reward has come!"

The Normans set up a yell of delight.

This gave Robin Hood the opportunity he was waiting for.

"Fear not," he whispered; "I am your friend. Help is coming!"

To Arthur Stutely's ears this sounded like a hideous joke.

"Get your work over quickly," he said, turning his head, so that he might not see his brothers. "If you are a man, you will not torture me in my last moments."

Just then Edgar Stutely cried out frantically:

"Do what you like with me; but do not hurt my poor brother!"

"Hush, boy, hush!" Arthur said. "Do not unman me. I would rather die a thousand deaths than let these Normans see tears in my eyes! Where is Oswald de Burgh? Ho! there, coward, come and see how a Saxon can die!"

"Put the rope round his neck and throw him off the ladder!" thundered the sheriff.

"One moment; there is something wrong somewhere," replied Robin Hood, and then shouted joyously: "Oh, happy hour! Oh, trusty men! I knew you would not fail me!"

Some thought he had gone mad, and ran forward to seize him; but they fell back as cries of pain and terror arose from the mounted soldiers grouped around.

Full fifty shaft arrows had sped into their midst, and in a few moments men and horses were rolling on the ground.

Then, before Oswald de Burgh could recover from his astonishment, as he saw soldiers and people tearing madly from the market-place, he heard shouts that weakened his blood to milk.

"Ho! for Robin Hood! Sweet liberty or death! Rescue! Rescue! No Normans!"

"Perdition! The rebels are upon us!" he shrieked. "Strong-i-the-arm, force me a way through this crowd!"

As he spoke, Little John leaped upon the rival giant and bore him from his horse, crying:

"Had you the strength of a hundred men, you should not escape me now!"

Oswald de Burgh made a cut with his sword at Little John, but it fell on a blade drawn by Robin Hood from under his shepherd's frock, and in a moment he had the sheriff by the throat.

"Now yield you, tyrant!" the outlaw cried. "Down on your knees to the man on whose head you have set a price. The order of things is changed. Upon the gallows you had erected to strangle these poor lads you shall die."

In the meantime the scene in Barnesdale market-place baffles description.

Panic-stricken, the Normans fled from the men in Lincoln green. Some crawled on their hands and knees to escape from the arrows, only to fall at the point of the sword.

Ned Carter, Tom Ringer, Will Scarlet, and Much the Miller's son were here, there, and everywhere, urging the Saxon peasants to join them in punishing their oppressors.

But where was Friar Tuck?

Casting off the hat which had troubled him so much, and disdaining to use a sword, he snatched a stout oak staff from the hand of an old man and rushed into the fray.

"Behold!" he cried, "it is written in the law that even a man of peace may defend himself. Take that. How fits that to a thick skull? Ho, ho! This is more like a fair than an execution. Down you go! Down you go!"

At every shout the jolly friar brought a Norman down, until there were no

more to strike, and he joined the ranks of the archers, now complete masters of the field.

The three Stutelys, on being liberated, bound Oswald de Burgh at Robin Hood's direction, and, even then scarcely believing in their good luck, fell at the outlaw's feet in thankfulness.

"Thank Heaven, not me," said Robin Hood. "Rise, lads, rise."

Near them lay Strong-i'-the-arm struggling like a bound panther, but Little John had no intention of letting him go this time.

"Keep still," he said. "You were hired to fight me, and fight me you shall!"

"What is your will with regard to him?" Robin Hood demanded.

"I would take him to our retreat, and there settle matters with him for once and all," Little John replied.

"So shall it be," Robin said. "Bind the big varlet to the gallows, upon which his master, Oswald de Burgh, shall soon swing."

A cry of joy bursting from a woman's heart now rent the air.

"I have kept my promise to your mother," Robin Hood said, turning to the three Stutelys. "She is here. Go to her and continue to behave like good sons, for man could have no greater friend than his mother. Away! I cannot bear to see her take you to her arms. It would remind me of the past, which I would fain blot out of my mind while such a villain as Oswald de Burgh stands before me."

"Robin Hood," said the sheriff, as the three lads ran across the marketplace to where two foresters were gently detaining their mother, "I am in your hands, but pause ere you carry out your threat."

"By the rood! I paused too long last time," Robin Hood replied. "The time had not come then, but you shall not escape me this time."

"Will nothing move you to reason or pity?" Oswald de Burgh demanded hoarsely. "Think you that my death will give victory to your cause? I tell you no! If you kill me, a hundred others will arise and avenge my death."

"What matters?" Robin Hood re-

plied. "Let them come. Think you that the woodman does not hold that he has done good work in destroying an adder, although there may be a nest of them not far away? Think you that the hunter pauses to send a bolt into the brain of a wolf, though he knows that a hundred are howling in the forest?"

"You argue of beasts, not men," Oswald de Burgh said, white to the lips.

"A beast bites, claws, and kills when hungry, in anger, or in defence of its life," Robin Hood retorted. "Therefore, the beast is beyond judgment; but man, with reason and intellect, wealthy, powerful, has no excuse for oppressing those born to bear the hardships of the world. You are rich; the poor looked to you; they asked you for bread, and in answer to their cries you murdered them in cold blood, and drove their widows and orphans from their homes into bitter weather to starve and die. Wretch! Prepare for death!"

Oswald de Burgh recoiled and gasped for breath as Robin Hood pointed to the ladder and then raised his hand.

Two foresters answered the signal, and in less than five minutes Oswald de Burgh had ceased to live.

CHAPTER 6.

The Return of King Richard.

At the royal palace in London dismay and apprehension reigned.

The liveried servants moved about like shadows, speaking in whispers and glancing furtively at the closed doors of the council-chamber, for there Prince John and the traitors who had favoured his cause had assembled.

Richard, the Lion-hearted King, had arrived unexpectedly in France, and was already on his way to England.

The Crusade had been one of victory, mingled with defeats, of triumphs lessened by regrets.

Richard, the warlike, generous king, the darling of his people, had suffered illness, imprisonment; but he was well and free again and coming home, never dreaming that his brother, in whom he had put such faith, had so basely deceived him.

But the story must be told now, and Prince John, his face dark with rage, paced up and down the council-chamber. His eyes flashed, his beetling brows met, and his hard lips were compressed into a long, thin line.

There had been a lengthy silence. Prelates, barons, and knights had not one word to say; but their minds were busy, and many of their heads seemed to rest uneasily on their shoulders.

"What!" Prince John thundered. "Are you all dumb? Have you to word, no plan, no scheme? Are you the men I trusted in? Tell me, are there no means by which this blow can be averted?"

"I know of but one way," Sir Thomas Husenham said.

"And that?" Prince John demanded, glaring fiercely at him.

"Submission!"

"Submission!" roared Prince John. "Talk not to me of submission when there are twenty thousand swords ready to leap from their scabbards at my command."

"Be not too sure of that," Baron de Cassey said. "Even now the soldiers and populace are shouting for King Richard. Listen to reason. Your brother will forgive, and we——"

"Ha, ha!" interrupted the prince. "I will take the words from your lips. You wish to keep your heads; like rats, you prepare to desert the sinking ship."

"By the splendour of Heaven!" exclaimed Baron de Cassey, starting to his feet, "this is too much, and now you dare to compare me to a rat."

Losing all command over his temper, he dragged the mailed gauntlet from his right hand and flung it at Prince John's feet.

"The blood of French kings flows in my veins," he continued hotly. "I am your equal, and, prince though you be, I challenge you to mortal combat."

"By the bones of the Conqueror, you shall rot in a dungeon of the Tower!" Prince John snarled. "Arrest the traitor!"

Not a man moved.

"Pshaw!" said Prince John, spurning the gauntlet. "I reject the challenge, Baron de Cassey. The council is dis-

solved. I'll look elsewhere than here for the support of true men."

At that moment there came a loud knocking at the door.

"Who demands entrance so noisily?" the prince cried. "Let him come in."

The door opened, and a knight, clad in complete armour, with visor closed, entered.

"Your name?" demanded the prince.

"Sir Henry Angerstein."

Prince John started, and the swarthy hue of his face turned ashen grey.

"What," he said, "you dare come into my presence—you, who harbour rebels, assist in shedding Norman blood, and take arms against your King?"

"'Tis false!" Sir Henry replied boldly—" 'tis false as the tactics you have followed. Prince John, I fear you not, for the hour of your power is passed away, and retribution is at hand. Oswald de Burgh is dead. He died on the gallows like a common felon. I bring you his sword as an earnest of what I say."

"Villain! Your life shall pay the penalty of your treachery!" Prince John exclaimed.

"Hold!"

The voice was a woman's, and Richard's mother, Eleanor, who had led a life of enforced seclusion since her son went forth to fight the Saracens, swept into the council-chamber.

"Hold!" she cried again, stretching out her arm. "Your commands are as naught now. My royal son has kept his homecoming a secret. Yesterday he reached Dover; to-day he is in London; he is even now at the gates of this palace."

Even as Eleanor spoke there arose mighty shouts.

"The King! The King! God bless King Richard! Long live King Richard!"

"Glad I am to know that he has arrived, sweet mother," Prince John said, forcing a smile to his lips. "I will willingly submit to him, and if I have done wrong I will crave pardon of him on my knees. Moreover, he shall know what trouble I have had to keep these nobles in order during his absence."

"The black-hearted villian!" Baron

de Cassey hissed. "Is not the bolt forged in heaven that will fall and crush out his vile life?"

"Ho, there, men-at-arms!" thundered Prince John. "Guard the door, and see that no man leaves! These varlets thought that I was playing into their hands, but they shall find that I was laughing in my sleeve at them the whole time. Is not the king coming? What delays him? I am eating my heart out to hold him in my arms once more."

"Stay, gentlemen," said Eleanor, looking in disgust at the faithless prince. "Richard will not forget to weigh past services against such offences as you may have committed. He comes! Richard, my brave son!"

Amid a flourish of trumpets, and through two rows of retainers bending their knees, Eleanor ran to greet Richard.

"Mother," he said, kissing her fondly, "'tis good to see you again. Youth I may have lost, for trial and suffering in captivity have aged me, but my love for you is as strong as ever. Poor mother! Nay, weep not; I will never part from you again."

She dried her eyes and led him to the council chamber, where Prince John was already on his knees.

"John," Richard said, looking sternly down upon his brother, "I know all. News of what has been passing came to my ears even while I hovered between life and death. Nay, speak not. Keep your lips closed, for no words of yours can excuse the manner in which you have abused the confidence that I reposed in you."

"But you will forgive?" Prince John murmured, bowing his head almost to the floor.

"Forgive!" the king echoed. "Does not your conscience tell you that you ask too much?"

"You do not know——"

"By the Holy Sepulchre!" King Richard interrupted, "I know that you have taken my place and urged the barons to place my crown on your head. You declared that intelligence had arrived of my death. That report was the concoction of your own wicked

brain, and now you ask me to forgive you!"

A sob was heard from Queen Eleanor.

"Mother," said the noble king, turning to her, "in spite of all his faults, he is my brother. It pains you to see him kneeling before me, and for your dear sake I will forgive him. John, I forgive you, and I wish I could as easily forget your offences as you will forget my pardon."

Then, turning to the noblemen, he continued:

"I have no time to-day to inquire into the manner in which you have behaved during my absence. I will consult my faithful mother, and be guided by her as to how I shall reward and how punish. Away, all of you—and you, John, too. I am in a happy mood just now, so take heed that you do not give me occasion to alter it."

One man remained—Sir Henry Angerstein.

The king had not recognised him before, but now he looked long and earnestly at him.

"Sir Henry," he said, his splendid blue eyes flashing, "I did not expect to find you in such company. Once you were true to me."

"Because I remained true to you my estates were swept away, my money stolen, my life threatened, and the castle in which I once lived happily is now but a ruin. All this, Richard of England, is the work of Prince John."

"Of a truth I have returned to hear strange things," the king responded. "But what do you here to-day? If what you tell me is true, your presence passes my comprehension, for surely you were in the lions' den."

"Listen!" Sir Henry said. "Amid all my troubles I found a friend, the so-called outlaw, Robin Hood. He has aided me, given me money, and afforded me shelter. To-day I came to bring Prince John news that Robin Hood has slain his greatest friend and partisan, Oswald de Burgh."

King Richard started, and the deep lines in his face hardened.

"I see now," he said, "what a fool I was to entrust so much power in so few hands. So Oswald de Burgh is

dead. That is a matter I will inquire into, and rest assured all other things that have happened during my absence will claim my attention. I have seen this bold knave, Robin Hood——"

"Pardon, your majesty, but he is no knave," Sir Henry said. "There is no more loyal or better man in all your kingdom. To know him is to love him."

"Well, by my faith! that comes strangely to my ears," Richard rejoined. "Is he not a robber?"

"He takes from those who have stolen, and gives back to the poor."

"He steals my game," said the king, his eyes twinkling.

"He contends that the Saxons have hunting rights as well as Normans."

"Sir Henry," the king said, "you have my leave to depart now, and if I find that you have suffered wrongly I promise you redress. As for Robin Hood, tell him that perchance I may pay him a visit when he least expects it."

When Sir Henry Angerstein reached the crowded streets the people crushed round him, anxious to know what had passed within the palace walls.

All expected to hear that Richard had put Prince John under arrest, but Sir Henry deemed it best to be silent, and, mounting his horse, rode away.

CHAPTER 7.

The End of Strong-i'-the-Arm.

Now turn we again to Barnesdale Forest.

Friar Tuck's discovery had been made use of. Down under the hollow oak, and amid those caverns where the Druids, and perhaps men and women of the Flint Age, had passed many a winter, Robin Hood and his followers took up their quarters.

Of room there was plenty, and soon the dismal region was transworned to one of comparative comfort. The dark walls reflected the light of many lamps; the hollow in the oak was widened so as to admit of benches and many other things being lowered, and in less than twenty-four hours the strange chambers were furnished in some degree.

Men came and went all day long. Holes were drilled under clumps of bushes into the caverns, so as to give more air, and to allow the smoke of lamps and fire to pass out.

There was one man, however, who, having found himself in the caverns, never dreamed of leaving them.

This was Strong-i'-the-arm, Little John's rival. They had brought him to the forest at the express desire of Little John, and no mention whatever was made of the fate in store for him.

The treatment he received astonished him and softened his brutal nature. Save that a heavy log was attached to his right ankle, he was unfettered and moved about at will. At meal-times he sat apart from the foresters, but received the same fare, and his bed was made as comfortable as any man's there.

But Strong-i'-the-arm knew that the crisis was at hand, and that it might come at any moment. Forgiveness he did not expect; but he soon discovered that Robin Hood knew how to respect even a ruthless foe.

What troubled Strong-i'-the-arm more than the suspense that haunted him day and night, was the fact that Little John never spoke to him; indeed, scarcely looked at him.

Once or twice Strong-i'-the-arm had ventured to address him; but Little John had either turned away or simply stared straight ahead, as if stone-deaf.

One evening a change took place.

Robin Hood returned from a hunting expedition, but neither Maid Marian nor her attendants, as the other ladies thought it an honour to call themselves, returned.

An extra supply of torches was brought down, and Friar Tuck undertook to arrange them.

Like Little John, the friar had been singularly quiet since the events that had happened in Barnesdale market-place.

"It is almost time that we heard of Sir Henry Angerstein," said Robin Hood, as they sat at supper. "I was loth to let him go unattended; but he would have his own way."

"True. He swore that he would pay

some of the debt that he owed you, and he will do it," Little John remarked. "Here's a health to him, and may he bring us news of Richard's speedy return!"

"Amen to that," said Friar Tuck.

The foresters talked lightly of future plans for an hour or so, during which time Strong-i'-the arm sat listening, like a man in a dream.

At length a strange, shuddering feeling seized him.

The shadows produced by the flaring torches seemed to beckon to him; and now, for the first time for several days, he saw that Little John was looking steadily at him.

"Shall it be to-night?" Little John asked, in a whisper, turning to Robin Hood.

"Ay; it were well over."

"Strong-i'-the-arm," Little John said, "for many days you have been prisoner, and yet more guest than prisoner, of Robin Hood. You must have known—you did know—that the time would come for me to demand satisfaction for the dastardly treatment I received at your hands."

"I confess, and regret it," Strong-i'-the-arm replied. "You need not harrow up my feelings by telling me of my misdeeds. I deserve death, and am prepared to meet it."

"You are a better man than I took you for," Little John said. "Oswald de Burgh employed you to destroy me; but Heaven willed otherwise. Oswald de Burgh died as he had lived, like a dog; but enemy as you are of mine, you shall have a chance. You must fight me this very night; so name your weapons."

"Not to-night—not to-night!"

The giant's great arms trembled as he held them out.

"Why not? Are you afraid to meet me in single combat?"

"Your nobleness of heart has made a child of me. Kill me, if you will. Take your sword and strike hard and deeply; but not a blow will I aim at you."

"This will never do," Little John growled, looking for inspiration from Friar Tuck.

"Certainly not," quoth the friar, wagging his head. "If he will not fight you, then surely he must take up a weapon against a man of peace, who will be contented to defend his head with a quarter-staff."

"Listen!" said Robin Hood, striding up to Strong-i'-the-arm. "Two things are impossible. First, you cannot stay here, even as a prisoner; and secondly, we cannot let you go free. Your offence deserves punishment—the loss of your life!"

"Take it," Strong-i'-the-arm replied. "It is yours—anyone's. I have no further use for it."

"By St. Hilary!" Friar Tuck cried, "this would make a fox laugh at the sight of a pack of hounds."

"What can be done with such a man?" Little John demanded.

"You promised to make me your slave," said Strong-i'-the-arm; "but I have received nothing but kindness at your hands. I'll not fight."

"But I swear you shall!"

"There goes the signal!" exclaimed Friar Tuck. "What now? By the rood, Barnesdale Forest is full of surprises!"

"Lower the ladder from the tree," Robin Hood said. "We cannot have too many guests to witness the passing of Strong-i'-the-arm; for die he must!"

"Two poor travellers lost in the forest," Will Scarlet cried. "Gentlemen, I beg you to be careful how you go! Take good hold of those clamps, or you will fall and perchance break your limbs."

"What manner of place is this?" demanded one of the travellers. "Are you honest yeomen?"

"Do I not look like one?" Will Scarlet answered. "Have you heard of Robin Hood?"

"Ay! The saints preserve us from him!"

"Just so," said Will Scarlet, laughing in his sleeve. "Robin Hood is an excuse for living underground. Fear not but that you will find a goodly company below."

The travellers were cloaked to their chins, and their bodies seemed to be heavily weighted.

"By some means," said one, as he

went scrambling falteringly down, "we parted with our escort, twenty good and fully-armed men."

"Only twenty!" Will Scarlet returned. "What a pity you did not bring more! Have you travelled far?"

"All the way from Nottingham."

"I know it well," Will Scarlet said. "Ho, there, Robin Hood! A surprise for you. Here are two noble gentlemen, and I doubt not but that you will recognise in them the steward and scrivener of the lamented Oswald de Burgh!"

"Trapped! In the hands of the rebels!" gasped the steward as he heard the startling words.

"Oh, Heaven help us, we are undone!" groaned the scrivener.

"Be not afraid; you have done nothing to us," Robin Hood said. "Sit you down, and our good friar shall bring you something to keep your limbs from trembling."

"They have had the run of too large a cellar not to know what good wine is like," Friar Tuck said. "But see how cold and shivering they are. Would it not be better if they removed their cloaks?"

"No, no! We are very well," the steward said, as well as his chattering teeth would allow him. "But who speaks of Oswald de Burgh as lamented? Surely he is still in the land of the living?"

"Where have you been not to know that he is dead?"

The steward looked at the scrivener, who, shaking his head, mournfully returned the glance.

"We have been visiting friends during Oswald de Burgh's absence."

"You lie!" Robin Hood said. "You have run away from Nottingham Castle. Off with their cloaks! Ah, just as I thought. They have been helping themselves freely from the coffers."

"Oh, what a world this is!" groaned Friar Tuck, holding up his hands. "Oh, this is much too shocking for a man of peace to hear."

Ned Carter, Dick Driver, and Will Scarlet cut the belts worn by the new-

comers, and poured from their wallets a great heap of shining gold.

"Gentles," Robin Hood said, "I thank you for this splendid gift. Had you taken up arms against me I should have dealt severely with you, but as you are merely a pair of sorry rascals you shall be let off with nothing more terrible than a sound flogging."

"Mercy!" the steward howled.

"St. Peter protect me!" the scrivener gurgled.

"Little John," said Robin Hood, "where is your leather thong—the one you give tastes of to such churls as these?"

"I have it here," replied the giant grimly.

"Gentles," said the outlaw, making the miserable pair a mocking bow, "let me assure you that there is not one groat of this money but will go to alleviate the sufferings of the poor. This must be a great comfort for you to hear."

"It ought to make them dance with joy," Friar Tuck remarked. "See how they open their mouths as if they wished to sing. Warble on, sweet Norman songsters. Sing, sing, sing!"

"I shall never recover from this," the steward moaned. "Robin Hood, I pray you let us depart, and we will never trouble you more."

"Little John," said Robin Hood, "do your duty. Thieves must be punished."

"He calls us thieves while he himself steals!" the scrivener almost shrieked. "Merciful powers! defend us."

"I take from those who steal and give to those who have been the victims of thieves," replied the outlaw chief.

At that moment Little John went to work with the leather thong, and there arose terrific howls from the steward and scrivener as they ran round the cave with the giant lumbering after them.

They were much more frightened than hurt, and so comical was the scene that Robin Hood threw himself down and roared with laughter.

"Enough! enough!" he cried. "Withhold your hand, good Little John. The sound of such music will

cause my sides to crack. Let them go—oh, let them go. Stay! though; it is only proper that Friar Tuck should give them his blessing."

"It shall be something worth remembering," bellowed the friar, snatching up his quarter-staff. "Out! out! scurvy dogs that you are."

And out of the cave and up the hollow oak the pair of knaves ran, blundering down one on top the other, and then tearing madly into the forest, where they lay hidden until day dawned, and then crept away no man knew whither.

After so comical a scene the tragedy arranged in regard to Strong-i'-the-arm could not be performed that night.

"To-morrow, then," said Little John, after a short consultation with Robin Hood. "What a change has come over him!"

"Ay, but give him liberty and he would easily forget," Robin replied. "Still, Little John, I leave it to you, for he is your prisoner, not mine."

Little John scratched his chin and tumbled his hair about in a whirl of bewilderment.

"To-morrow! It shall be to-morrow," he muttered as he went to his bed. "By that time I hope he will be ready to go through the ordeal. Tush! Does he not consider that it is I who may fall and not he?"

The whole thing was a puzzle to the giant, and it was a long time before he could persuade his eyes to close in sleep.

A touch on his shoulder brought him up with a start on his elbow, and his eyes grew round with astonishment when he saw Strong-i'-the-arm bending over him.

"What do you want?" Little John demanded.

"Only to tell you that I have altered my mind. I will meet you where and when you will. Let us fight with swords."

"Nothing will suit me better," Little John replied. "But why wake me to tell me this?"

"I could not rest until I had done so."

"Then rest now, and let me do the same," Little John growled. "Stay!"

he added suspiciously. "Who allowed you to come? You've improved in manners, I grant, but, all the same, you might have murdered me in my sleep."

"Friar Tuck," was Strong-i'-the-arm's reply.

"You have been talking to him?"

"I have."

"I understand," Little John said in a kinder tone of voice. "We'll fight here, and if you get the best of it Robin Hood will set you free. It is my wish, and he has promised to comply with it."

Then silence reigned, and it was not broken until a loud blast from a horn proclaimed that morning had come.

Breakfast having been served and partaken of, Robin Hood called his men to attention.

"The hour has now come when our Little John must meet Strong-i'-the-arm. For weapons they have chosen swords, and I trow that we shall see a fight worth the witnessing. If Little John falls, Strong-i'-the-arm not only goes free, but I will give him a purse of the gold which belonged to his master, Oswald de Burgh."

"I'll have none of it," Strong-i'-the-arm replied. "It is red with blood, and is not the sort of stuff to help a man along the road to heaven. Besides——"

"But where is Little John?" Robin Hood interrupted.

"See, here he comes with Friar Tuck at his side," Will Scarlet replied.

The friar's face was a puzzle. Both giants had confessed their sins, and of these Friar Tuck's lips were sealed for ever, and yet, as he advanced with Little John, he looked as if he would have given the world to divulge something.

The preliminaries were soon arranged. The combat was to take place in the open, the foresters forming a ring round the chief actors, and the first blow that brought either of the men fairly to his knees was to end the conflict.

"Being a man of peace," said Friar Tuck, "I'll not stay, but retire to my cell."

"How now, friar," Robin Hood cried. "Something, surely, must ail you?"

"In truth there is," Friar Tuck replied. "I am not myself; I am not well, and I pray you excuse my absence."

"But your services may be required."

"I think not," the friar replied. "If so, I can be sent for. I shall not be far away."

"Well, do as you will," Robin Hood said. "How pale you are! See what a draught of wine will do towards bringing the colour back to your cheeks."

The friar drew his cowl over his face and walked slowly away.

In his heart there was a secret, and he knew what was about to happen.

Ten minutes later the two giants, stripped to the waist, stood face to face.

The foresters stood like statues, and even Robin Hood's face grew pale, and his lips quivered under such an emotion as he seldom felt.

A sword was put into Strong-i'-the-arm's hand. Slowly he ran his eye along the glittering blade, and then tested it with great deliberation.

"You fight with your own sword?" he said to Little John.

"Yes," the giant replied. "But what matter? My sword is exactly the same length as yours. Measure them if you will."

"There is no occasion," Strong-i'-the-arm replied. "Still, I would ask a favour of you."

"I will grant it if I can."

"That is easily done," Strong-i'-the-arm replied. "I have a fancy to fight with your sword."

Little John threw his sword towards Strong-i'-the-arm.

With a glad cry he thrust the handle into the ground, and turning the point upon himself, fell bodily upon it.

"I could not strike a blow against so noble a man as you, Little John!" he cried. "Still, you have had your revenge, for I have surely died by your sword."

All this was the work of a few moments, and before Little John could run to the assistance of his rival and pluck the sword out Strong-i'-the-arm was dead.

"Great Heaven!" Robin Hood said as

he turned away, "I am sick at heart. I know what ailed Friar Tuck now."

And so did all; and thus ended the great feud between the rival giants.

* * * * *

Soon after the mortal remains of Strong-i'-the-arm had been reverently buried, Robin Hood rode away, and returned with Maid Marian and her fair attendants.

"Sweetheart," he said, "now that King Richard is home again the burden of the Saxons will be lightened."

"I fear it," Maid Marian replied. "The king is all kindness, but many of the barons are powerful, and they will continue to oppress the poor."

"Then let them look to themselves," Robin said. "Heaven send me some cause that I may justly fight for."

Even as he spoke one of his scouts came galloping in.

"There is trouble on the borders of the forest," he said; "and methinks it concerns Sir Henry Angerstein."

"Ha! I almost feared it," Robin Hood exclaimed. "We'll see to it at once. Ho, there! Twenty trusted men to go with me. Sound boot and saddle!"

Twice twenty men answered the summons, but Robin Hood was in no mood to be hampered by a large force.

What there was to do must be done quickly.

It was likely that Sir Henry had fallen among some common robbers—or, at the worst, into the hands of a few wandering Norman soldiers.

The outlaw did not anticipate much trouble, as he knew that since Oswald de Burgh's death the main body of the soldiers had decamped, and such as remained had done so for the sake of plunder.

The never-tiring Robin Hood rode at the head of his brave band.

It was a lovely night, and they had no difficulty in keeping to the path, for the moon was at its full and not a cloud shadowed the vast expanse of silvery light.

Scarcely a word was spoken until some miles were covered and a hut came in view.

Robin Hood held up his hand.

The men touched the reins, and as if by magic the horses halted.

The outlaw whispered his instructions.

Half the force was to proceed with him on foot, the rest were to remain behind.

"That," Robin Hood said, pointing to the hut, "is just the sort of hovel for Normans to take refuge in. Quiet now! Hush! Down all!"

The outlaw's keen ears had detected a sound coming from the hut, and as the foresters sank amid the bushes the door opened and two Norman soldiers came out.

"We'd best be careful," said one. "We've taken what gold he had in his purse, and we've got him, too; but my advice is to let him go. When Richard takes to travelling through England, there'll be some ugly questions asked about how certain noblemen have been treated."

"What is that to us?" the other replied. "Dead men tell no tales. He crowed loud enough when he heard that Robin Hood had strung up Oswald de Burgh, and I'm for dispatching him out of hand and burying his body."

"Which tells me that Sir Henry is within less than bow-shot of me," Robin

Hood muttered, under his breath. "But go on; this sort of talk interests me keenly."

"Grelkin," said the first speaker, "you talk like a fool. Oswald de Burgh is nothing to us now; at the best he was a tyrant, and lived in constant fear that one of his own men would murder him. We are deserters now, and I'd not say nay if Robin Hood asked me to enlist. If what people say is true, he has as much gold as the royal coffers contain, if not more."

"By St. Giles! Richard dipped his hand pretty deeply into them for the Crusade," Grelkin replied, laughing. "We'll sleep over it and decide what to do in the morning. There are six of us to consider, and perhaps the better way would be to let the majority decide."

"I'll agree to that," Grelkin said.

"And since it will take some little time, so do I," thought Robin Hood. "Tush! I have wasted the time of twenty good men when five would have sufficed."

Grelkin and his companion returned to the house, closing and barring the door after them.

Robin Hood laughed softly as he rose.

"They came out to get a breath of

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fresh air, I suppose," he said, "for that one-room hovel must be stifling. We'll surround it, lads, and give them such a fright that they'll run a good way ere they stop to make more plots."

There was no window in the hut, nothing but a slot cut in the wall, and a hole in the roof.

The light of a smoky torch burnt within, and Robin Hood, creeping up, soon gained a good view of the interior.

There were six Norman soldiers present, gaunt, haggard-looking wretches; their hair was unkempt, and it was easy to see that they had not spent a merry time since the fight in Barnesdale market-place.

In a corner lay Sir Henry Angerstein, bound hand and foot. It was easy to see what had happened.

The Normans had stolen upon him, struck him from the saddle, letting his horse go; and now, while Sir Henry was calling himself a fool for allowing himself to be thus caught, Robin Hood was looking at him and enjoying the scene.

"Now, you traitor," said Grelkin, shaking his brawny fist at the knight, "just listen to me! We are about to decide your fate; but we'll be lenient with you if you will tell us where Robin Hood keeps his jewels and money."

"I have no more idea than yourselves," Sir Henry replied; "and if I had, you would never get an answer from me."

Grelkin spluttered out an expletive, and turning to his comrade, consulted with him.

"We've hit upon a good plan," he said presently to Sir Henry. "Robin

Hood will pay a good round sum for your liberation——"

"Not a groat to such as you!" the outlaw chief thundered, splitting the door with one blow from an axe. "Ho, ho! rascals, I did not think you so bold as to make a capture in this forest. At them, lads! Beat them with the flats of your swords! Such rats must be cleared away!"

In a few moments the Norman outcasts, like rats indeed, were scurrying away into the forest to find refuge where they could.

"Well, Sir Henry," said Robin Hood, "you have acted unwisely in travelling without companions. Why not send word that you were coming?"

"I never dreamed of being molested, since Richard is again in England. The news travelled like the wind, and there are few in the land that do not know of it."

"You saw the king?" Robin Hood said.

"Ay, that did I. He gave me his promise to inquire into the complaints of the peasantry. Be not surprised if he should come to you in person."

"By the mass, I will make him welcome under our greenwood tree in Sherwood Forest!" said Robin Hood.

The outlaw chief spoke half in jest. He could hardly believe that King Richard himself would seek him in the woods and glades of Sherwood. But it really came to pass, and the thrilling story of his meeting with the king and the exciting adventures in connection will be told in the next number (7) of the ALDINE ROBIN HOOD LIBRARY.

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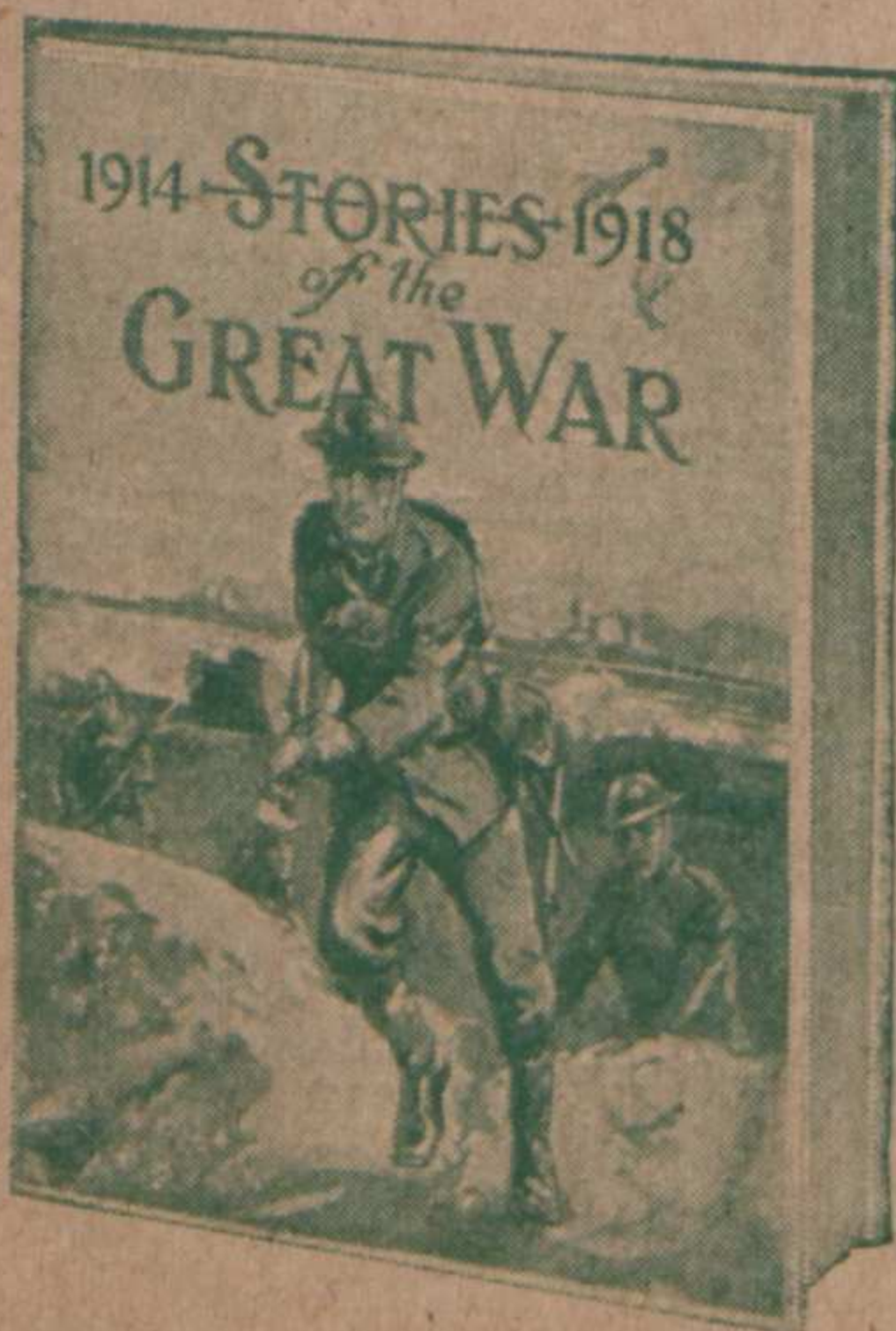
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